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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet was prepared to teach certified public accountants (CPAs) the skill of oral communication, in order to prepare them for an increasing number of news interviews on financial and business events. It stresses that the best interests of both CPAs and the general public are served if relations with the press are marked by friendliness and mutual respect. This is accomplished when the accountant provides the reporter with simply stated facts, conveys the broad significance of an event without technical detail, and answers questions in a frank and honest manner, particularly when facts are missing or when confidentiality is involved. A perspective on the reporter and the purpose of newswriting is included in this discussion. (HAI)

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WHAT TO DO WHEN THE REPORTER COMES

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As professional men, CPAs are enjoined from advertising, and they must not evade this injunction by resorting to publicity as a covert form of advertising. But while a CPA must avoid publicity for self-aggrandizement, he is not prohibited from answering legitimate questions. The profession recognizes that accounting is a subject of proper public interest and, indeed, that there is both obligation to provide information and benefit to be derived from so doing.

The AICPA interpretation of Rule of Conduct 502 in The Code of Professional Ethics states: "502-10— Information to the media. *A member shall not directly or indirectly cultivate publicity which advertises his or his firm's professional attainments or services. He may respond factually if approached by the press for information concerning his firm, but he should not use press inquiries as a means of aggrandizing himself or his firm or of advertising professional attainments or services. When interviewed by a writer or reporter, he is charged with the knowledge that he cannot control the journalistic use of any information he may give and should notify the reporter of the limitations imposed by professional ethics. A member may give information to the reporter or writer about his firm, such as its size, number of partners and employees, location, etc. He should not make statements to the writer or reporter as to comparative size with other firms or other statements that would tend to aggrandize his firm at the expense of other professionals.*

"Technical research reports and studies on accounting and related business subjects may be distributed to the media provided such material does not contain information about the firm or its members beyond the authorship credits permitted in Interpretation 502-9. Authorship may be credited to individual member(s) or to the firm.

"Press releases and public statements made by members or firms enunciating a policy or position related to the practice of public accounting or addressed to a subject of public interest are permitted.

"Publicity arising out of the member's involvement in public service activities is not considered advertising provided the publicity is not initiated by the member.

"In any material released to the public the member shall confine himself to statements concerning the subject of the release, shall not promote himself or his firm through self-laudatory statements of accomplishments, or make statements that tend to deprecate other members."

Commenting on these matters in their book Ethical Standards of the Accounting Profession, *John L. Carey and William O. Doherty say: "The rule against advertising is not intended to prevent public recognition of the personal achievements of a certified public accountant. Legitimate newspaper publicity about CPAs, including their firm names, is not advertising, but gratuitous recognition of something they have done which is of public interest. The Institute even encourages members to make statements on subjects which contribute to the public awareness of the profession."*

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE REPORTER COMES

As business organizations grow to serve wider markets, managers need more information to run their enterprises efficiently. For much of this information, they turn to accountants.

With 25 million Americans owning stock and methods of financing becoming increasingly sophisticated, stockholders, security analysts, and portfolio managers for institutions need great amounts of data to make investment decisions. For these data, they depend on accountants.

As new sources of tax revenue are sought and government regulations multiply in our intricate economy, individuals and corporations need help in dealing with myriad instructions and report forms. For this help they look to accountants.

It's little wonder, then, that accounting is in the news these days, and that reporters increasingly call upon accountants for interpretation of financial and business events. This circumstance brings up the question of how CPAs can best communicate with journalists.

An idea exists that if a lack of favorable press attention coincides with a paucity of acquaintanceships among newsmen, it automatically follows that making such acquaintances will produce good publicity. This is not necessarily so. The mere fact that one can communicate, in the sense that he can speak and write, does not mean he can communicate effectively. Poorly handled contacts with the press may produce no results—or poor ones. Some of the derogatory statements about accounting that have appeared in the public prints have come out of the mouths of CPAs.

Effective communication is a skill which must be learned. This booklet discusses just one, but a most important, aspect of dealing with the media of public information: oral communication with individual reporters.

Some people have a knack for talking with reporters. They are adept at the quick quip, the felicitous phrase that "makes news." And since a reporter is out to get news, he ordinarily enjoys working with people with this ability, and a good rapport is established.

The great majority of people, though, don't have this knack. So when the phone rings and the voice at the other end says, "This is Sam Smith of the *News-Standard*," or if the receptionist announces, "Mr. Smith is here for the interview," most CPAs probably tend to tense up. A person about to submit to questioning for publication fears he may say something that will make him look foolish. He has a feeling that being exposed to publicity is a little like taking off his shirt at a formal dinner.

Uneasiness may be at least partly overcome by realizing that the reporter is no doubt a quite normal person—with the individual preferences and pet peeves which that implies, but no ogre.

The CPA who receives a telephone call or personal visit from a reporter will best serve the public interest, the profession, and himself by keeping in mind the reporter's purpose.

The reporter has a vocation just as the CPA has, a vocation vitally important to a free society. The reporter's purpose in calling is to get a story. The basic material of a news-story is facts. (Opinion and speculation may help a journalist evaluate factual information but, in general, opinion becomes news only when framed in the *fact* of a speech or public pronouncement.)

If you know the facts and can properly release them, do so as succinctly and plainly as possible. Remember that, with very few exceptions, even experienced business reporters do not have extensive knowledge of accounting. So don't discuss the matter as though you were talking to another accountant. Avoid technicalities; they will probably appear to the reporter as fussy hair-splitting, and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of his readers anyway. Similarly, don't start out with, "Well now, that's a very complicated subject." Even though that is the fact, the statement may seem an attempt to dodge a meaningful discussion.

At the time the reporter phones to arrange the interview, determine the subjects to be discussed. Then do a little preparatory checking of facts and figures. Arrange to have data you might need conveniently at hand during the interview. The reporter will be grateful, since it will save his time.

If the reporter wants to ask questions over the phone, without forewarning, you are not bound to answer off-the-cuff. Tell him you want to look in your files or check with an associate, and will call back in fifteen minutes. And be sure to call!

In an interview, keep to the heart of the matter, and deal with the fine points merely by reminding your listener that there are certain intricacies or exceptions and you are talking in broad terms. Where possible, illustrate abstract concepts by examples from common experience—as, for instance, by discussing depreciation in terms of the reporter's automobile.

A by-gone wit defined a bore as a man who tells everything he knows. It's a good maxim to remember. If the reporter wants fuller detail, he'll ask for it.

If you do not have the facts or if the story the reporter is seeking is in some area of accounting which has been largely outside your practice, say so—and perhaps suggest someone else he might contact.

If you do have the facts but feel you cannot properly discuss them (because, for example, they fall in the area of client confidence), state this plainly. Here again, you might refer the reporter to someone else, in which case, as a matter of courtesy, immediately call the person given as reference and tell him what you have done.

From his experience as a newsgatherer, the reporter has learned that all of us tend to identify emotionally with groups of which we are members—our college, company, church, political party, profession. We feel pleasure when the group is praised; we react to criticism against it almost as though the criticism were against ourselves.

Knowing this, a reporter expects that a person being interviewed will incline to play down things that he believes might reflect unfavorably upon his profession and to emphasize the things that will give a favorable impression. Therefore, if a story has some potentially negative aspects, the reporter may concentrate on these in his questioning, in order to compensate for the presumed bias.

If the reporter is right in thinking there are negative elements in a situation, don't deny it. Doing so will only damage your credibility. Instead, explain these elements and try to help the reporter see them in perspective. If you feel he is tending to give them more importance than is warranted, tell him so and give your reasons.

If the negative side of the matter pertains to the views or actions of other parties, and you feel it would be unprofessional to comment or ill-advised to become involved in contention in the press, state frankly that you believe it would be improper for you to discuss the subject, and suggest that the reporter go to the persons most directly involved.

Granting that it is a reporter's duty to probe, it must be admitted that there are a few who persist abrasively. A point which has been thoroughly and honestly covered will be returned to again and again. It will be dropped while another conversational path is followed, and then returned to, as though to catch the answerer off guard.

In an experience of this kind, the person being interviewed should say that he has nothing to add to what he has already said—and then, indeed, *not* add anything. No matter how often the matter is reverted to or how the question is rephrased, this response can be repeated.

It is important to avoid becoming irritated or, at least, to avoid showing it. Perhaps the reporter is deliberately being provocative in order to draw out a statement in heat that would not be made otherwise.

Another tactic a reporter sometimes uses is to refer to a bit of information picked up in a conversation with someone else, in a way that suggests he has more knowledge than he really has. The person being interviewed, assuming that the reporter is already familiar with the matter, may then add further bits of information, which the reporter uses for a third call, a fourth, and so on.

On a matter of more than routine importance, there is no reason not to ask a reporter whether he has interviewed others on the subject about which he wants to talk with you. He will probably confine his answer to yes or no, without specifying individuals. You can, nevertheless, try to determine the scope of what he wants to cover. The point is that in a working meeting with a newspaperman, there's no rule which says all the questions have to come from one party. The occasion is not an examination by a public prosecutor, and should not be so regarded by an interviewee. Rather, the occasion should be a mutually agreeable affair between persons with a common objective of providing accurate information to the public.

Be courteous but firm. A good interview involves a certain amount of flexibility and give-and-take between the principals, but you should not let yourself be drawn into discussing subjects against your better judgment. Say immediately that you are not prepared or competent to discuss the matter and stick to your guns.

Don't volunteer information. If it is technical or complicated, it will probably serve only to confuse. But more than that, a bit of casually offered comment may indicate that you possess information which would enable the reporter to write a "juicier" story than he had hoped for.

Beware the exit-gambit. Sometimes a reporter will pocket his notes and put away his pencil—and you take this to mean he now has all the information he needs. Naturally, you and he will converse for a moment or two before he takes his departure. This is the time to guard against a slip of the tongue under the impression that you are merely indulging in idle talk. Discuss the weather, if necessary to make conversation, but try

not to return to the subject of the interview. To a good reporter, an interview is ended only when he has written the story and it has appeared.

If printed matter is available on the topic of the reporter's interest, supply him with it. But don't overwhelm him. If he is on a spot-story, he will not have time to read much, if anything. If he is working on a feature story, he'll be able to read more, but not thick tomes. So when you have material that might be useful, choose short pamphlets or mark pertinent passages in longer writings.

If information that a reporter wants is not immediately available, offer to send it later. And make a note on your calendar so as not to forget the commitment. Even if several days or weeks pass before the material comes to hand, and you think it is too late for the reporter's purpose, send it anyway and let him make the decision. He may want to file the material for possible use in the future. By showing that you have not forgotten your promise and can be relied on, you will have strengthened your rating as a news source.

A reporter may call you about something he has heard of, but which is in the course of development and still so indefinite that you would rather not discuss it. In this case, explain why you do not want to go into the subject at the moment, but add that you will let him know as soon as you can. And, again, be sure to keep the agreement. If you fail to do so, and a competitor gets the story before the reporter who has obligingly waited to hear from you, you have done the latter a disservice.

When a proposed story is on a highly technical subject, and the reporter is not writing against a close deadline, you can offer to check his copy for accuracy, if he would like. As a general rule, reporters will not submit their copy for comment; on a spot-story, there may not be time to do so anyway.

If, however, you are allowed to see the piece in typewritten form, confine your suggestions to points of important fact; do not try to impose your ideas as to style or as to what makes news. (In return, the newsman will doubtless agree not to tell you how to conduct an audit!)

Should you have reason to believe that a story may contain direct quotations attributed to you, you can properly ask to have at least the quotations read to you over the phone as a safeguard against your being put in wrong light.

Sometimes during an interview a reporter will ask for "off the record" information. Before answering, be sure that you and he are in agreement on what he means by "off the record." You may think he only wants information to help him evaluate the facts he already has. But he may want the information for use without attribution to you by name. In the event the matter is of a controversial nature, it is likely that you will be recognized as the source by others conversant with the facts even though the story identifies you only as a "prominent local accountant." So think twice before acceding to a request for off-the-record comment. Make certain you are not disclosing confidential or privileged matter. And determine beforehand exactly how the reporter intends to use the information.

If part of what you say is on-the-record and part is not, make special effort to be sure that the changes are clearly signaled. Particular care in this respect is called for in telephone conversations because the chances of mistake are greater than when face-to-face.

There is a difference, of course, between off-the-record information

which is simply background and that which is actually confidential. The great majority of newspaper people are trustworthy individuals who respect confidences. But to avoid the risk of unintentional slip, and in the interest of good relations all around, it is best not to discuss with a newsman something you would not want to see in print.

A cardinal rule in dealing with the press is never to ask a reporter or editor to kill a story. This does not preclude your giving reasons why you think a story should not appear: it may be about something that is trivial or already stale, it may rest on plainly doubtful rumor, or it may be downright inaccurate. But accounting is important to many people, and in a free society such as ours there is a principle of "the public's right to know." Journalists regard their profession as particularly responsible for protecting this principle. Effort to suppress a story is resented and often only strengthens a newsman's determination to publish it.

Newspaper publishers and staffs are deeply conscious of their position as guardians of the public welfare, and most of them, by far, are diligent in fulfilling this role. But it is a simple fact of life that newspapers are also businesses. Like any other business, they have to earn a profit to exist. This they do by selling copies of their publication and, even more, by selling advertising.

The greater a newspaper's circulation, the higher the revenue from newsstand sales and subscriptions, and the higher the rates advertisers will pay. Thus there is understandable drive to build, or at least maintain, circulation.

The number of readers a newspaper attracts is likely to depend not alone on how informative it is but also on how entertaining and exciting. It follows that events involving controversy or struggle are prime items of news. Editors and reporters have not created the attractiveness of such subjects—they merely recognize it as a trait of human nature.

In addition, the staffs of newspapers feel a strong sense of competition not only with staffs of other papers but among themselves. A reporter wants to be recognized as someone who gets good, newsy stories.

Realizing all this, a CPA should be aware that a statement tinged with contentiousness may be highlighted in an interview and so produce a different effect from what he intended. He should choose his words with care and, even then, if they are to be quoted, try to assure himself the quotation will be accurate.

In this latter connection he should realize that liveliness of writing, desired by editors for all sections of their papers, is at a special premium on the business pages where the subject matter is generally matter-of-fact but can be made more readable by a bit of spicing. Thus one CPA, who told a reporter it was his impression that chartered accountants in Great Britain did not face the same pressures from clients that certified public accountants experience in the United States, found himself quoted as saying that accountants in Great Britain do not have to "knuckle under" to clients as American accountants do. When the CPA maintained that he had said no such thing, the reply was, maybe so but the reporter felt that his own wording was more colorful than the CPA's.

Let's say that you have been interviewed and have followed all the suggestions set forth here. You have answered the reporter's questions thoughtfully and have given him a good deal of your time. Then the story appears. And it is not at all what you had hoped for.

Except in very special circum-

stances, don't call the reporter with after-the-fact criticism. If your technical explanations got a bit tangled in going through his typewriter, remember that he is not a trained accountant—and maybe you weren't so clear as you thought. Although it may seem to you that the subject has been grotesquely oversimplified, reflect that the reporter is writing for the average newspaper reader, not other accountants.

If your view on a controversial issue has been subordinated to recital of an opposite view, it shows that the reporter talked to others besides you —but if he hadn't talked to you, your side might not have appeared at all.

Perhaps a point that you considered minor has been put at the top of the article, while the heart of the matter, as you see it, has been played down. Well, the relative emphasis reflects the reporter's—or his editor's—judgment of what will interest readers. That is the newsman's prerogative. If your main point isn't mentioned at all, it may be that the reporter included it in his copy but it was cut for lack of space.

In the event the story contains a really serious error, call the reporter promptly and point it out to him. Do not complain to his boss. If the error is one of important fact, the reporter may see to it that a small item of correction is printed. In any case, he will be less likely to make a similar mistake another time. Should the story have come out well in your opinion, send the reporter a note of compliment.

The objective of business reporters on newspapers, and of writers for financial magazines, is to bring economic facts to the public. Certified public accountants can help them to assemble and interpret these facts. At the same time, CPAs can be benefited by wide and fair portrayal of the nature and value of accounting.

The key to good press relations is to earn a reputation for being always frank and fair with journalists. Help a reporter perform his work by providing him with facts as clearly and simply as possible. Aid him to convey the broad significance of an event without burdening his readers with technical detail. And if you can't give the facts because you don't have them or because of confidentiality, be frank about it.

CPAs serve their own and the general interest by working toward relations with the press marked by friendliness and mutual respect.